

Conclusion

My aim, while I was involved in the anarchist movement, as I hope I've shown by some of the above examples, was (after my early youthful involvement) to drag working-class political activists out of the anarchist mire. I hoped to shift the directionless anarchists into direct contact with the working class.

Similarly, the aim of this work is not to dispirit working-class activists. My intention is to share my experiences of my decade within the anarchist movement, and explain why my enthusiasm eventually wore off. I also try to explain why I think the anarchist movement is the shambles that it is, and why I no longer believe anarchism is a revolutionary practice. My real intention is to encourage working-class anarchists to question why they are involved in such a movement, and to inspire them to seek other ways of taking part in the class struggle. After all, you can only set up so many anarchist groups and centres before it becomes clear that what you are doing is pointless, can't you?

The anarchist movement is rubbish, and it can never be anything else, no matter how many times some people try to launch new initiatives that are meant to breath fresh life into it. Smash Hits is just 'New Class War' in a time of New Labour - a time of nonsectarian 'open discussion'. I've seen it all before. But it's not just because the majority of people involved in it are either middle-class wasters or middle-class politicians. Anarchism itself does not provide ideological answers to the needs of the working class. We need to escape from the mentality of the "revolutionary" and start looking at working-class reality, without the hindrance of middle-class involvement.

I've met some brilliant people during my involvement in the anarchist movement. Some are lifelong friends, and some are still in the anarchist movement. They should get out, but I do know how difficult that is.

Footnote

While I've been writing this work, I thought it would be useful to check out more recent anarchist propaganda. Who knows, it might have got better in the years that I've not been involved. I needn't have bothered though. Green Anarchist for one have gone more batty than ever. Surely it's a only a matter of time before they are in one kind of cell or another. Of the others, there is nothing in the publications of the ACF, Class War or any other group that makes me think that anything positive is starting to emerge out of them.

Out of politeness more than anything else, a couple of people have, over the years told me that they are setting up an "anarchist centre" or "organising a conference in Bradford". It all amounts to nothing, because the same people turn up talking the same bollocks. There are variations on

MY EXPERIENCES AS A WORKING CLASS ANARCHIST

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Introduction

The anarchist movement is bollocks.

I first got involved in the anarchist movement in the early 1980s.

This work is about the kind of things I got up to. It's not about what a laugh it was, it's about how shit it was and why. It's about my experiences in Sheffield and Leeds over more than ten years involvement in the anarchist movement. My conclusions are based on a wide range of my own experiences, and discussions I've had with other people.

What follows describes my early excitement and commitment to a movement that I genuinely believed was made up of people who were serious about changing the world. I made a lot of mistakes but I am proud of my efforts, which were always made with complete conviction even if they were generally misguided. My experiences helped me to develop my understanding of society and what is and, more importantly, what isn't revolutionary politics.

Background

I was brought up on a council estate in Oldham. I had an intense class-consciousness and plenty of class hatred. My early beliefs were directly based on my experiences, not what I read in books; I could see what work did to my parents. My dad was an engineer fitter. My mum did several shop assistant jobs. From an early age I could calculate just how many unpleasant hours my parents put in at work to pay for any of the commodities they bought. They are both fucked up physically before they are 65 years old because they are working class.

I've hated the rich and powerful since my earliest memories. I hated the local shopkeeper because he was getting rich by jacking up his prices, in spite of the level of deprivation that was on the estate. I used to throw stones at the local Tory councillors big house in the hope of randomly hitting someone or something. I hated the police because I was on the receiving end of instant justice a couple of times. I also knew that they were uninterested in anti-social crime on our estate. My anger was class anger, not just personal - I believed in the strength of working-class solidarity. At school, although I got on with most teachers, I was considered a rebel, a class-room communist. I was advised by one teacher to go to live in Russia. When I was at sixth-form college I was even asked if I wanted to join the Young Communist League. I gave it a lot of thought before declining.

I remember getting into loads of arguments during the Falklands War. I was the only person I knew who was openly against it. I risked my neck quite often as my mates turned into a bunch of flag waving chauvinists. Some even considered joining up. I remember arguing that the only war worth fighting was the class war. I remember hearing a black bloke on the

their ideology in order to build what they call a revolutionary organisation. They imagine that all we need is to understand their ideology properly and then we will get in line. However, if we were to become confident in our own abilities, and to understand our own interests, there would no longer be a space for middle-class lefties. In fact that is exactly what happens, and explains the left's complete failure.

I mentioned the Poll Tax campaign earlier. One of the most important features of that movement, which eventually resulted in the abolition of the Poll Tax, was independent working-class action. Neither the left parties, nor the anarchists were able to rein people in to the formal movement.

Without revolutionary ideology to cloud their vision, the working class knew that the Poll Tax was unworkable if they decided to make it thus.

I was at meeting after meeting when the Socialist Worker Party and Militant desperately tried to use the Poll Tax as bait to catch members for their Parties. While we were trying to pull people in to the actual campaign, the overwhelming majority quite rightly wanted nothing to do with us as politicians.

That is something that the middle-class revolutionaries just can't handle. Middle-class revolutionaries need to believe that we are dependent on their leadership. Otherwise, they become superfluous. In order to convince themselves they develop their ideology - an ideology written and spoken in terms of what they want us to believe working-class self-interest is, but in fact based on what their own interests are.

Anarchism actually distances working-class anarchists from the working class. I mentioned earlier that getting involved with anarchism had had a negative effect on me. It made it impossible for me to communicate with my own class. It provided me with a vocabulary, culture and lifestyle that differentiated me from my roots - tainted with middle-class attitudes. And it has made it harder for me to get back to where I should have been all along.

The development of working-class confidence and activity is not part of their ideology in spite of their slogans. They have no desire to communicate with the working class, and certainly no desire to learn from the working class. My experience within Leeds Class War, in spite of the slogans on the front of the paper was that working-class members were discouraged (and ridiculed) because their ideas and their development were not taken seriously. I've heard it said that one working class ex-member of Class War in particular "had no politics" because her ideas did not fit in with what the leadership defined as politics.

They become middle-class revolutionaries because they see the need for some kind of change in society. They learn about revolutionary politics from their books, but then they are disappointed that the working class doesn't fit in with their preconceptions. How could it? They are unable to understand working-class culture, except as part of a sociology lecture. They never really come into contact with the working class.

The middle class is, in terms of its role in oppressing the working class completely indistinguishable from any so called ruling class, and is therefore one and the same thing. And yet, in order to justify their involvement in what they call "class politics" middle-class anarchists claim that it's the rich, the state, the ruling class, the Government, capitalism etc. that we should fight against. Not them and their domination of us.

Like everything else the middle class touch (our art, our sport, our culture), political activity loses its lifeblood as soon as the middle class get involved. They talk about revolution, how to make one, and what the world will be like afterwards, but only among their cliques. While that suits the academics who make a living studying ideologies, middle-class 'revolutionaries' use ideologies in an attempt to destroy independent working-class political activity, ideas and thought etc. Working class experience is belittled. To them, we are uncouth. They gave us racism and now they condemn us for being racist. They gave us sexism and now they condemn us for being sexist.

Discussion of a future revolution with middle-class input is meaningless - for the simple reason that what the middle-class revolutionaries want is completely different to what the working class needs. When I was a member of Class War, the national secretary seriously argued that 'gender issues' were more important than class issues. I believe that what appear to be gender issues, when middle-class ideology gets to work (i.e. acting against working-class interests, confusing the issues to hide the fact that working-class women have nothing in common with middle-class women), are in fact class issues.

They have no appreciation of what it's like to go to bed hungry and cold, with holes in the front of their shoes as a kid. They don't grow up seeing their parents working themselves into an early grave. They've never had to live off bread and jam for days on end. They don't have anything material to worry about except what they invent to make their pathetic lives more interesting - and middle class political activity is part of that. Political theory is an interesting hobby to them. Their packaged ideology is their way of trying to bamboozle us into either following their leadership, or apathy, which has the same end result.

The middle-class 'revolutionary left' assume that their ideology is more important than the interests of the working class. And where has this led them? To create irrelevant organisations, that reflect their interests but pretend to be for working-class revolution (thankfully, the working class is completely oblivious to their efforts). This is the result of over two centuries of middle-class meddling in our affairs. They've always used us to fight their battles, from the English Civil War, through the French and American revolutions, to the Russian revolution not to mention all the national wars since the Armada. We don't need their bullshit (which is based on their bourgeois revolutions - "liberty, equality, fraternity") They need us to fulfill their wet dreams.

In their dreams, the middle-class left rely on our compliance with

radio say, "no bit of dirt is worth my blood". That small comment had a profound influence on my life.

When I went to university in Sheffield I expected to find it populated by young men and women in donkey jackets discussing the coming revolution. I couldn't have been more wrong. I'd never met anyone who was middle class before (except teachers). I had no concept of what they were like. I was in for a shock. There were a few students who actually did believe that they were planning the coming revolution - University is the training ground where the young middle class play at rebellion and hone their management skills. Those who had become temporary Trotskyists were learning to be vacuous and offensive (it is interesting to note the proportion of people in management jobs who were Trotskyists when they were younger).

Eventually, I met a group of what seemed like angry young people, who were 'doing the business'. They had what is now known as "attitude". Some were students - they were nearly all middle-class 'drop outs'. They were on the periphery of the Sheffield Anarchist Group

Early years - blind activism

For me, it was easy to get into the anarchist movement. Partly, it was because I was impressed by the way in which the anarchists were able to articulate things that I had thought about, but never heard spoken before. My mates on the council estate had hated bosses and coppers, and they were class conscious to a point, but they would never have talked about abstract ideas like capitalism or alienation. This was something I hadn't come across before - a whole group of people who could articulate ideas about politics and culture that were similar to mine. It was also romantic, exciting and fun. I dropped out of University in my final year. I became a full time 'political activist'.

I was a young man open to new ideas - and full of a revolutionary spirit - I was desperate to discuss revolutionary politics because I wanted to do something to change the world - I wanted to know how it could be done. At the time, anarchism, and mixing with other anarchists, gave me a direction. To a certain extent the anarchist movement inspired self-confidence, mutual aid and trust within the clique. No one made decisions that I had to follow, at least not formally (though there was a strong moral code - this included things like: you weren't allowed to be openly into porn; you couldn't say the word "cunt" out loud; you had to be vegan; at that time you weren't supposed to be into football, etc. If you went against any of these, you could be an outcast).

I got stuck into everything that was going on. I got involved in the more extreme kind of animal rights activity because I thought I was "doing the business". I became an "anti-sexist man" after being introduced to radi-

cal feminist ideas. I took up anti-fascist activity. I was an activist. Whatever came my way, I took it up with enthusiasm. I was certainly active. I was not a revolutionary.

I developed the look of a young anarchist. I got completely submerged in the anarchist social scene. I had hardly any friends who weren't anarchists. Whenever I visited my parents I argued with them about anarchist politics (before that I hadn't ever had a real conversation with my dad). I went on marches, abused the police, fought with fascists and Trotskyists, trashed public meetings, harassed Labour Party hacks, chased Tory MPs, and went to an endless round of meetings. These were exciting times in the anarchist clique in Sheffield. There was a wide variety of confrontational activity.

I got so into hunt sabotage that I went at least once a week during the hunting season. I would get up at 6 am and spend the day in the back of a van, hangover or no hangover, run miles across ploughed fields. Over time I learnt to control the hounds. It was great fun and it kept me very fit. Getting into scuffles with hunt supporters occasionally added to the thrill.

When the British National Party established themselves a regular sales pitch on Saturday afternoons, Sheffield's anarchists swung into action. We look to turning up and trying to look inconspicuous (just how inconspicuous a group of anarchists in second hand combat gear with multi-coloured hair could hope to be is a good question). Over time, we made other contacts with various serious anti-fascists and set up the Sheffield Anti-Fascist Network. We organised a semi-military campaign, including reconnaissance, monitoring, and propaganda.

Eventually the confrontation came. There was a brawl on a Saturday afternoon involving twenty odd people. It was exciting stuff. I found myself face to face with a burly skinhead (Baines) and exchanged a few punches before he was jumped on by a couple of my comrades. A couple of fascists got badly hurt, one was hospitalised, and a couple of each side got arrested. We'd outnumbered them and none of us had a scratch on us. This fight has since gained some historical significance. Tim Heple described the fight in more detail in his fascist memoirs *At War With Society*, published by Searchlight. More recently, conspiracy theorists at Green Anarchist have hinted that Heple escaped a prison sentence because of his links with the establishment. That is not true. Heple was picked up by the police after the fight. He was not involved in it though. He'd been watching from a safe distance. When the case came to court, it was obvious that there was no case against him.

Over the next few weeks a few scuffles broke out, and the fascists increased in number as word got out that there was a free fight with a bunch of scruffy lefties every Saturday. Support was bussed in by the British National Party from all over Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. After a few weeks most of the fascists got bored. There were a few face offs, mainly posturing, but most of the fascists were working-class kids who's main interest in fighting with us was because we were identifiable as a group of lefties and

NO IDEOLOGY IS REVOLUTIONARY

I've rejected anarchism now. It's based in an ideology that actually prevents it achieving what it supposedly aspires to. As a step towards a revolutionary theory it may be valuable, to a certain extent, for some people. Coming from a working class background, I found it useful in a way, because it confirmed to me that there was more to life than school, work, marriage, kids and death. It also had a negative influence on me. The negative outweighed the positive.

Like all ideologies, once they are unable to stand up to reality (as they inevitably are), it's time to ditch them. In fact, it's time to ditch all ideologies and start concentrating solely, and pragmatically, on class issues. Whenever conflict arises, the first question any working-class activist should be asking themselves should not be "what is the anarchist line on this?" but, "how can I contribute to the working class winning something, both in the long and the short term?" The only answer for revolutionaries, in any political debate, is: "my class, the working class, right or wrong". Anarchism in general, apart from the ridiculous versions that exist just now is unable to do this because it is tied to a rhetoric, a set of assumptions and historical precedents that muddy the water.

This is the case because ideologies are sets of ideas that are supposed to explain how the world works. All ideologies put politics into little packages of absolute truths. Once we start thinking of 'revolutionary ideology' as a tool for political activity we are sucked into the world of middle-class domination and reproduction of their control over us because, whatever the ideology, they are the experts in it. They are the ones with the time to pontificate about the meaning of life, and what we need. They are the ones with the articulation skills, which actually enable them to cover over the fact that they are unable to articulate anything of any value at all. Discussion of political activity is reduced to: "does it fit in with the ideology?" In other words, does it fit in with the interests of the middle-class experts in the ideology, rather than the fundamental question: "does it serve the interests of the working class?" Working-class political activists should ditch all ideologies.

As an illustration of the way ideology has been used to serve the interests of the middle class, let's look at one of their absolute truths: in all anarchist publications, the point is made that our great enemy is the 'ruling class'. This ruling class is separate from the middle class.

Whoever worked that theory out obviously didn't go to our schools; sign on at our dole offices; go to work at our workplaces; watch the shit we watch on telly; get treated like cattle at football matches; rent a shit house; go to a trade union meeting; get hassled by the police, etc. Anyone who did would know that it is the middle class, in all its guises which is our most obvious and direct enemy.

that none of us wanted anything to do with a bunch of animal rights nutters. Anyway, so that we could check them out, we invited them to one of our social evenings. Towards the end of the night, I was talking to one of them, and he raised the issue of the PO box. I said that I'd try to get a decision for him that night. Off I went to speak to the secretary of the group.

Her response was: "I'll ask Brian if it's alright". In other words, although we'd all had reservations, Brian was the person she considered most able to make a sensible decision on our behalf. It seemed odd to me that while the whole group was at the social, we weren't all going to have a say in making the decision. I quickly gathered everyone round and within a few seconds we were able to tell the other group that they could use the PO box. Brian Laing, for the record, went to public school and Cambridge University. I don't think the group secretary was conscious of the fact that she was taking decision making power away from the group, and handing it to the group leadership. I think it just seemed natural to her to ask Brian to make the decision.

Brian is a man with many endearing qualities. For example, he slips anti-Semitic jokes into his conversations; he continually makes derogatory comments about people with red hair; he laughs at a lot of people behind their backs in a particularly nasty way (I was going to list them here, but basically if you've met Brian, he has laughed at you behind your back, unless you are one of three people in his clique, you know who you are!). He is a nasty individual. He used to hang out with Norman Blair. Norman was accurately described as "one of the most clueless and deluded middle class pricks in London" in the back of *The Enemy* is Middle Class. Norman went to Winchester public school, which costs as much as my parent's house is worth in annual school fees and yet he has acquired a cockney accent.

If they can not come up with some kind of meaningful revolutionary activity, and they never will while they are part of a movement that is dominated by the middle class, working-class anarchists may as well stop trying. There is no reason, other than self-satisfaction (or what used to be called "life style-ism"), for continuing to put energy into a movement that is entirely self-contained and has no links with reality. It is going nowhere. The most astute political ideology in the world is only negative if it is used as a means of separation from the working class for the enlightened few. The naïve that is anarchist theory is not astute at all, even when it includes the words "working class" on the front of its publications.

students, nearly all from outside Sheffield. They could get a kick out of it for a while and impress their mates but it didn't amuse them for long.

We also got involved in a campaign to stop the deportation of a bloke from Sri Lanka who was seeking sanctuary in a church in Hulme, Manchester. Viraj Mendis happened to be a member of the Revolutionary Communist Group (RCG). The way the RCG were using the bloke was pitiful, but it did cut both ways (one popular chant at the time was "When Viraj Mendis is finally free, He will leave the RCG"). Without the RCG he would have been just another deported refugee.

The RCG organised what was called a "vigil". Basically, people would lock themselves in the church overnight with Mendis. We were supposed to be prepared to defend it in the event of a police raid. Some of us went over to Manchester one night a week and stayed over. Sometimes we'd go over on the Friday and take part in the weekly march from the city centre to Hulme. This occasionally got a bit more interesting when the odd reactionary turned up to taunt us. Anyway, we went over every week and stayed up all night chatting, playing cards and football in the church.

Eventually, the Greater Manchester Police (under the leadership God's own cop, James Anderton - "all coppers are baptists") tired of us and broke into the church to deport Mendis on Home Secretary Douglas Hurd's orders.

The week after the deportation, a "mass" rally was organised. Tony Benn came, on the invitation of the RCG. He made a speech about how the best way to fight state racism was to elect a Labour Government. Some of us gave him some verbal stick. The new Labour Government have recently announced new measures to make it quicker and easier to deport asylum seekers.

Another regular event was trashing political meetings. During the run up to the 1987 General Election, a Tory Party public meeting was blitzed in Sheffield. The candidate ended up on his arse, closely followed by the chair he had been sat on. A couple of councillors got spray foam in their faces and complete chaos ensued for a few minutes. Whistles and air horns were blasting out and the smell of stink bombs filled the hall. We wound them up so much we practically had to fight our way out. It was a fantastic buzz. We all went to a pub and spent the rest of the night playing pool, and laughing, after making sure we were all safe.

Several years in succession, we completely embarrassed the Labour Party mafia in Sheffield at the May Day march. One year, during the anti-Poll Tax campaign we sparked off a well planned chant of "are you paying?" whenever one of the official speakers tried to speak. The whole crowd took it up. We managed to drive Martin Flannery MP off the platform with our chants. The organisers, to prove their democratic nature, asked for a show of hands of those who wanted to hear Flannery speak. I literally counted about five hands up in the air out of about 2,000 people. Flannery accused us of being Nazis and then legged it. We then held an open forum and invited

people out of the crowd to come and use a loud hailer to say whatever they wanted - and some did.

After that year we tried to make Sheffield a national focus for anarchists on May Day (reclaiming May Day we called it) - One year, over a hundred anarchists came from all over the North of England. The "officials" were driven to holding their Trade Unionist "rally" in front of a handful of the faithful inside the City Hall instead of the traditional rally on the steps outside. We had our own PA set up and had organised speakers from all over Sheffield speaking about all kinds of issues, from library closures to racist attacks.

We didn't restrict our activity to the Labour and Tory parties. Both Militant and the SWP had reason to regret holding public meetings on subjects that we were interested in. We would turn up en masse and be generally disruptive and have a laugh. In particular, whenever the SWP did their regular "What is Anarchism?" public meetings, it often came close to a brawl.

I was at the big anti-Poll Tax riot in Trafalgar Square (and many smaller anti-Poll Tax events that led to confrontation with the police). On that day, I saw things I'll never forget. I witnessed things that made it the most exciting day of my life I did my best to soak up the atmosphere. One of the most incredible sights I'll ever see was hundreds of coppers, truncheons in hand, running away. Many thousands of people were up for it. It was brilliant.

All kinds of anarchist organisations were set up in Sheffield at the time. Most were set up in a spirit of optimism, they would then sort of function briefly, and then die a lingering death. Experimental social organisation was tried. Various anarchist centres were set up, food co-ops, squatting, self-defence classes etc. On the surface, a feeling of solidarity and mutual aid developed, in complete isolation from the rest of the world.

When there wasn't much happening, I learnt to print and published anarchist books. As part of Pirate Press (and later Irate Press, on my own) I typeset, designed, printed and collated around twenty titles in all. At first I did it to raise funds for "the movement". Later I did it to subsidise my dole. I worked all kinds of scams to make life on the dole more comfortable. I also worked on leaflets to help people avoid being harassed into taking a job by the dole office.

I helped to put together a massive library of anarchist literature, and books about politics in general, containing several thousand books. I also gathered and organised a massive archive (probably one of the biggest in the country) of all kinds of memorabilia, papers, leaflets, badges etc.

I took out subscriptions to all the anarchist papers, from Black Flag, Class War, and Direct Action, to Green Anarchist, including Merseyside Anarchist and Anti-Clockwise. I developed an interest in long dead revolutionaries and anarchist history that could see me through the long nights when there just wasn't a meeting to go to.

I went to anarchist bookfairs in London every year and ran a stall

revolution. I now know that they can not be. Their activity within the anarchist movement is restricted to maintaining their hold on it. This includes appearing to provide a useful contribution (they publish "better" books, their artwork is "better", they are able to explain their politics "better").

If you step back and observe it, it becomes quite clear that while the anarchist movement is supposed to be about taking power back, middle-class anarchists use their status, their background, their education and their cultural roots to retain control. I've often seen less articulate working-class people ridiculed and put in their place because they didn't have the confidence, or the experience, to speak as clearly as the middle-class leadership.

There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that Leeds Class War, for example, was dominated by a couple of middle-class people, who came from extremely privileged backgrounds. It's easy to say now, but there were times when I should have at least spoken up about it.

At the time that I left the group I wanted to continue to contribute to the national paper. I was told by the middle-class leadership of Leeds CW that I wouldn't be allowed to - without either the group or the national organisation discussing the issue. At the time I was too gob-smacked and upset to argue. Surprise, surprise, when the group did discuss it, in my absence, the leadership, in some kind of Orwellian way had been right all along. I was not to be allowed to contribute to the national paper. I was told that the rules of the organisation stated that all members of the Class War Federation had to be members of a local group. If I wasn't going to be a member of Leeds CW, they were taking their ball home. At the time, the rules also stated that they were not to be considered tablets of stone. The rules were being used by the leadership of Leeds Class War to exclude me from Class War nationally, because I didn't agree with them. I added myself to the list of working-class members who had enough.

I later heard that the same sort of thing had happened to another working-class ex-member from Liverpool Class War. When he decided that he didn't want to waste his time with the local group but wanted to continue to work on the national paper. It creases me up now to think how important these people think they are, and the way they make decisions about who can and can not be involved in their organisations. The membership of CW at that time was already less than a hundred in the whole country.

Middle-class domination has left the movement so confused that from inside it's impossible to see that it even happens, but from the outside it is obvious that the middle class wouldn't stick with it if they weren't running the show.

I can think of another illustration. While I was a member of Leeds Class War, the group was asked by another local anarchist group if they could share our PO box. They were mainly students, punky/hippy 'anarchos' and were linked to the ACF. We hesitated, rightly in my opinion (in fact, I'd now tell them to fuck off). We wanted to know what kind of propaganda would be produced with our address on it. Basically, the bottom line was

rich mates stuff themselves with smoked salmon before watching the game on video". The real truth was that the authors of the article had only been going to the ground on the back of the trendy middle-class interest in football awakened by the publication of Fever Pitch. Like everything else that the middle class "discover", they fail to understand it. They dive in head first, hoping to find real life and, in the process, kill it off.

In short, Class War was boring and affected. It's no wonder the organisation dwindled and collapsed. Once you'd read one copy of Class War, you never needed to read another one, ever. The Class War Federation was then only capable of motivating its members and supporters by grabbing headlines in the middle-class media for various posturing. One example of this was the "keep it spikey - not fluffy" leaflet, which the tabloid press loved.

Other anarchist papers sink into the same problem. The last time I saw a copy of Direct Action (the paper of the Solidarity Federation), the back page had an article entitled something like, 'What is Anarcho-Syndicalism' (unfortunately, not sub-titled "a Cure for Insomnia"). In other words, practically the same article as was on the back page of the very first copy of Direct Action that I ever saw (and probably almost every one in between). The propaganda of the Solidarity Federation is basically the anarcho-syndicalist equivalent of a train spotting magazine.

Middle-class rebellion

The real problem is that the politics of the anarchist movement is based on middle-class rebellion. Because of their background, middle-class people generally find it easier to express themselves than working-class people. When the rebellious middle class take an interest in the anarchist movement, the working-class anarchists have to either tackle them head on, or move along. It is impossible for the middle class to have a neutral effect on anything they touch. They have to dominate. They can't absolve themselves by getting a relatively down market (but clean) job and living in a rough area. You can take the middle class out of the suburbs but you can't take the suburbs out of the middle class!

Another comment that sticks in my mind from when I was younger was made by someone who's house I stayed in London. He said: "the middle class don't only run the State, they also run the anarchist movement". He then went on to rattle off names of people who had gone to the most prestigious public schools (unfortunately, I recently spotted him on TV in a public access programme about the Movement Against the Monarchy). At the time, I took this with a pinch of salt. I didn't dispute it, I knew the public schoolboys who were taking a definite leadership role within the movement. But, I thought that as long as we were all on the same side, it was alright. I thought, at the time, that the middle-class activists were capable of being anarchists - which I thought meant supporters of some kind of working-class

selling my own pamphlets. There were always arguments late on in the day when people were tired, drunk and feeling less comradely. Sometimes fights would break out. It's not surprising really considering some of the shit that was on sale, and the attitude of some of the idiots that went.

One summer I spent ten days in Amsterdam helping someone to do some research on the history of Anarchism in Sheffield. We stayed in a squat in the city centre. We spent all day every day in the International Institute of Social History, poring over copies of old anarchist and socialist newspapers from the 1880s and 1890s. We compiled several books full of notes ready to complete the half-written book that my we were working on. It was really interesting and we had a laugh. We found things like tickets to anarchist fund raising events over 100 years old, original leaflets, personal letters, reports of meetings etc, that had been saved in excellent condition.

One of our most exciting finds was a 100 year-old scrap of paper that we'd read about in contemporary writings of the time. It was covered in the illegible scribble of an anarchist, David Nicoll. At the time, Nicoll had been the editor of a well respected (within political circles) national anarchist paper Commonweal. Nicoll went mad while in prison after the Walsall bomb plot. He spent his later years scribbling on pieces of paper and selling them to his old comrades as if they were propaganda. It was incredible to be able to hold the actual piece of paper. Although it really was a terrible thing to see, we both had a fit of giggles in the reading room of the Institute. Serious old men with Marx/Bakunin style beards sat around reading first editions of Das Kapital.

Later, I went on a pilgrimage to Barcelona. I went to pay my respects at Durruti's grave, and did the tour of the sites of the old city where the working class had fought off the fascist insurrection, only to be suppressed on Stalin's orders. I was taken in to one of the CNT's union offices and shook hands with a couple of old Spanish blokes and bought a couple of key-rings with Durruti's face on them.

What's it all about?

Those are just some examples of the kind of things I got up to. In all that time, I rarely stood back and really asked why I was doing it all. When these thoughts came into my head, I was satisfied with the argument that we were carrying a new world in our hearts. One "comrade" used to say that we were "ambassadors of anarchism". We were keeping anarchism alive for the future. Our work was propaganda by deed. Our books were inflammatory. I was satisfying my conscience by my activism. At least I wasn't just lying down and taking what society was throwing at me

Over time I did start to question things like:

- why did the movement never get any bigger?
- why was there never any progress?

- why are anarchists generally unreliable?
- why did most anarchists have no enthusiasm for anything that required understanding, planning and patience?

The answers only really started to become clear to me after I left the anarchist movement. Not surprisingly at the time that I know more about politics than I ever have before.

Anarchism is supposed to be a "revolutionary theory". To be an anarchist is to reject government – fair enough. Anarchists generally do put energy into both fighting against the restrictions imposed by authority and trying to develop alternatives.

However, anarchism is ambiguous. Anarchist theory developed out of the struggle against the encroachment of the capitalist organisation of everyday life. But it also developed out of a need to break away from feudal restrictions on economic and social activity. In other words, historically, anarchism has a bourgeois, or middle class side to it. Having said that, at least some strands of anarchism are firmly tied to working-class struggle as an alternative to Bolshevism. There is a rich and proud history of working-class activists who have described themselves as anarchists – people who have been able to participate in working-class struggle as part of that class, and who have gained the respect of their fellow workers. In Britain, they have always been the very tiny minority of politically active workers – and the minority of anarchists in my experience.

Since the early development of anarchism as a revolutionary theory there have also been the wankers and bull-shitters who have served to destroy any credibility that anarchism has within the working class. Today's anarchist movement owes more to the bull-shitters than the heroes. A conspiracy theorist may spot that this state of affairs suits those with a vested interest in the status quo. The average modern anarchist is generally more concerned with the way they look and the food they eat than any other kind of "struggle".

I found that the anarchist movement attracts a lot of "discontented" people. It's like a lamp attracting moths. Often people who are able to be charismatic within cliques find a niche. Many of them have had the benefit of a middle-class education. On the other hand, it also attracts a lot of social misfits and inadequates. Maybe these two kinds of people go together, feed off each other. Some anarchists I've met have serious mental health problems (over and above those that make them want to call themselves anarchists in the first place). More generally, anarchists are people for whom political activity is a substitute for a real social life.

The movement is characterised by internal disagreement. The amount of "clear blue water" between, say, the Green Anarchists and the Solidarity Federation makes it ridiculous to talk about a single movement. The wide range of ideas that come under the anarchist banner makes it easy for anybody who has the slightest gripe about society to describe themselves as an anarchist and fit in with the rest of the anarchists. The overarching political liberalism that this encourages ("we should respect each other's

address meetings. People who went to gaol for their beliefs – when gaol meant picking oakum in dark damp cells. Stunts, leafletting and fly-posting are an easy way out, an easy way to convince yourself that you are doing something when doing something real is so much harder. Chucking buckets of water over politicians is completely ineffectual, except that it helps EMI to shift a few more units. It even serves to reinforce the popular image (that is not far wrong) that anarchists are just modern day jesters, whose job it is to make fun of the ruling elite – but we all know that really they are just a bit 'learning disabled'.

Most anarchist propaganda is produced without enough thought. It's easy to write page after page of clichéd anarchist propaganda, which is why groups like the ACF produce so much of it. Nearly all anarchist propaganda is aimed inward, if not to a strictly defined anarchist clique, then within a milieu of rebellious youth.

Some does claim to be aimed at the outside world but the evidence speaks for itself (Check out *Smash Hits*, by New Class War, Organise by the ACF, Subversion by Subversion etc). The repetitive revolutionary rhetoric that makes up anarchist propaganda is not only bullshit, it's boring. It doesn't inspire, it puts people off. The only purpose it serves is to fill space and give people a self-satisfied glow, because it is easier to write than put into practice.

If you take a look at any back issue of *Class War* you'll see that practically every article ends with the same "it's time to kick the rich" style sentence. So much repetition completely dulled any inspiration *Class War* might have created. Towards the end of its existence every issue became almost identical to the previous one. No one could be bothered doing anything different that might involve a bit of work or thought.

The language that *Class War* used actually came across as an attempt to manufacture the image that the *Class War* Federation were an integral part of the working class, rather than a natural expression of the organisation's relationship to the working class.

An example of this even occurred in our own *Yorkshire Evening Post*. At a time when the whole of the traditional working-class following of football was decrying the influx of middle-class 'fans' who were pushing up admission prices; destroying the atmosphere; and making us all sit down, what did two of Leeds *Class War*'s middle-class members do? They bought season tickets for Elland Road and became overnight Leeds United fans. Neither of them was from anywhere near Leeds. They hated Manchester United, of course (in spite of one of them coming from Surtiton), and developed opinions on the game worthy of lifelong Leeds supporters. They failed to see the irony of the situation, and even joined in with the general attitude of "it's our game being ruined by the champagne hospitality crowd".

We printed a couple of articles about Leslie Silver, the then Director of Leeds United: "The truth (sic) is that Silver and his cronies have never liked 'rabble' like us: we sing too loud and we don't have Swiss bank accounts. They'd love to see the ground full of director's boxes – where their

was summoned to London to respond to the accusation. Just how the crew of cowboys that sat in judgement considered that they would be a match for an MI5 agent I don't know. I still don't know why it even mattered. As far as Class War was concerned, if we were putting out revolutionary propaganda, that we were all agreed on, would it matter that we were being effectively subsidised by the state?

In contrast, a few months later, when one member of Leeds Class War was accused of being a scab, the response from Leeds Class War (and their class conflict credentials).

Communication breakdown

As often happens when people leave movements, once I had stepped outside the "anarchist movement" I was able to see just how pathetic it all really is. It also didn't take long before I was hearing on the grapevine that my ex-comrades were discussing my own lack of credibility (I got the same reaction when I distanced myself from the animal rights movement. That time, I heard that some people were spreading the hilarious rumour that I'd been "seen in McDonalds").

And so, I drew together my thoughts about what was wrong with the present anarchist movement. For a start, I immediately concluded that some anarchists (the majority of the movement) simply don't want to break out of their cosy rebellion and that those that do are inevitably thwarted by those that don't.

A few years ago, one of the most common statements being made in practically every anarchist meeting was that there was no such thing as "community" in a capitalist society. I remember arguing about this point with the person who was the national secretary of the ACF at the time (she lasted less than six months before getting bored with it). What makes me laugh now is that she, and practically every other active anarchist is so isolated from their surroundings that they have virtually no contact with anyone beyond their own clique. They could only argue that there was no such thing as community because they were completely cut off from it. They couldn't see it because they had no links at all with the people they lived amongst. Most of them are middle class, living in working class areas. It is probably true to say that there is no such thing as community among the middle class, where social events are based on consuming culture as a packaged commodity.

Most anarchists don't want to put in the necessary effort to communicate their politics to anyone who isn't already interested and experienced in their own way of discussion. That doesn't compare favourably to anarchists in the past who would work all week and go out to speak in public most nights, sometimes walking ten miles or more to

opinion, even if we don't agree with their interpretation of what anarchism is") makes it impossible for those who believe in a more political version of anarchism to detach themselves from the clowns. The movement has no coherence and no direction. It's not merely a joke to suggest that anarchists differ on the fundamental meaning of "anarchy". In spite of that, people within the movement constantly take the piss out of the Trotskyist left for its factions.

In my decade or so of anarchist activism, I saw time and time again, that people claiming involvement in the movement were incapable of understanding the politics that they mouthed. They didn't even try for the most part. Incidentally, although one of their favourite pastimes is slagging off Trotskyists, for the most part anarchists know absolutely nothing about Trotsky. Trotskyists are just as pathetic as anarchists, if not worse, but for a political activist, it would be useful to know something about Trotsky's ideas before commenting on them (few of which have survived intact in today's Trotskyist swamp).

I came across people who claimed to be part of a social movement who had no intention of ever trying to seriously communicate the ideas that they supposedly believed in. I couldn't begin to count the number of arguments I had about producing propaganda that is more likely to be read than thrown away. Too many anarchists were content to keep producing lazy, "punk rock", petty, "offensive" stuff. Even those few who have realised that presentation issues count are still incapable of producing propaganda that anyone outside the movement would bother to read because of the language they use.

In many cases getting out of bed enough effort to provide anarchists with a fulfilling revolutionary life. At best they were demoralising for themselves and anyone else who thought that the anarchist movement could be a serious option. At worst, they actually shape the movement, leaving it both the joke of the left, and the bogeyman of the right.

I went to anarchist meetings every week where people were literally more worried about missing their favourite soap opera (and not for any other reason than they thought it was kitsch - by definition an anti-working class attitude) than whether we could organise support for striking workers. Of the things that did get done, most were directionless because nobody ever stopped to think about what we might want to achieve or what the next steps should be. We never asked ourselves why we were doing anything. Most things were done in a very half-hearted way.

That was in Sheffield in the 1980s. At that time we had the longest running strike in British history going on in our own backyard. The strikers at Keetons were running a continuous 24 hours a day, seven days a week, picket line. Some of us did provide active and meaningful support for the strikers, and gained enormous personal respect from the strikers and others involved in that struggle. I'm still proud of the way I stood up and got involved with the Keetons strike, which I will go into more detail about below.

The Start of My Disillusion

One of the members of the Blackberry Anarchists, the group that was going at the time, put in endless time and energy supporting all kinds of worthwhile struggles. In fact, she is one of the few people I knew at the time that I still have respect for. She was genuinely into

working-class solidarity and mutual aid, without thought for personal gain or kudos. For that she became well known throughout Sheffield among "organised workers" (as an illustration, I could mention a comment from a couple of blokes from a steel works trade union, in a pub after a Poll Tax meeting. She'd never met these two before, but they knew her by name). This activist contacted the Keetons strikers with an offer of practical help. She gained their trust, and the outcome was that the anarchist group would cover their picket line every Sunday afternoon. The strikers could then relax with their families for one afternoon a week. It made a difference for them. They were made up. Every Sunday we arrived and took over their caravan. They went home for a few hours. They got a telly in especially for us and always filled up the water and gas tanks so that we could have a cup of tea.

One Sunday there was a knock on the caravan door. A group of strikers from the P&O strike, which was going on at the same time, had come to visit the Keetons Strikers. They were in Sheffield as part of a speaking tour and decided to drop in as a show of solidarity. They even brought a bottle of whisky with them. They sat with us all afternoon. They were surprised, and interested, to find that there was a group of people prepared to do what we were doing without trying to make some kind of political capital out of it. They wanted to know about our group and our politics. They even wanted to come to one of our meetings but we talked them out of it because we would have been embarrassed for them to see what went on. They invited us to go down to stay with them, to see what was happening on their picket line.

At this time, the anarchist group had about 30 regular attendees. After the first three or four weeks, only three or four of us did the four-hour Sunday afternoon stint at Keetons. Most of the group found it too boring. Most of the anarchists thought it more worthwhile to go out delaying the deaths of foxes than getting involved with a bit of real political activity. Admittedly, it wasn't much fun, especially in Winter. There was a very poor bus service out to Darnall, where the picket was. In spite of that, three of us kept it up for over a year and later combined it with mid-week street collections. It wasn't much, but it was of real practical importance to the Keetons strikers. Not only that, it also helped their morale. It was probably the most important thing that anarchists in Sheffield have ever done.

One measure of how much the strikers appreciated it was that they would invite us, as their guests, to fundraising events. One particular

Other than the national paper we struggled to find anything to do. We did start to produce our own free news-sheet, the Yorkshire Evening Post. This publication went to four issues before the group couldn't be bothered doing any more. My reason for working on the Post was to produce something that could put forward everyday news stories, with a class-conscious slant. In the long term, I think that this is a key way to confront the barrage of middle-class propaganda that we face every day. In the short term, I hoped that we would at least be putting something into people's hands that said: "this is what Leeds Class War think".

When we stopped producing it my disillusion was complete. I was finally convinced that the whole of the anarchist movement was rubbish. I left Leeds Class War. As I left, I wrote to them explaining that I thought that producing the local paper was the most positive thing we could be doing given our lack of numbers. It wasn't perfect, but we could at least work on it. I said that if the group was going to stop producing it without coming up with any other ideas then I just wasn't interested any more. The effort required to fill four A4 pages with short articles was not beyond us. Printing it cheaply was not a problem. What was a problem was getting the group members to give it out. The usual problem. It didn't necessarily require anyone going out of their way but the group found it too much effort. Producing the Post was our only public activity, the only time when we came anywhere near contact with reality.

I parted company with Leeds Class War after arguing that to reduce the group's activity to fly-posting and the occasional leafletting would:

- be the next stage in what was clearly a continuing decline;
- be a negative step to take by any political group that was supposed to be into relating to the working class.

The group's unofficial, but hardly disguised public-school educated leadership wrote back, via the group secretary, to say that the group was going through a period of apathy that would pass, and that we should just kind of "tick over" in the meantime.

As I predicted, Leeds Class War collapsed completely a few months later. Before they did they did get round to putting up some posters. I was glad to have left before having any part in putting up such pointless rubbish.

Shortly after I packed it in, one of Leeds Class War was accused in print of being an MI5 agent (not that he could have put up a flat pack if he was paid to). By coincidence this bloke, although he is a social inadequate, was probably the most active anarchist I've ever come across. At the time I thought that if he was an MI5 agent, we could do with more of them. In reality, he was caught in the crossfire of a pathetic squabble between Searchlight (the anti-fascist journal that goes out of its way to discredit anarchists) and Larry O'Hara an "investigative journalist".

London Class War's response was to set up a Kangaroo Court. He

In the early 1990s, Leeds had what was apparently a thriving Class War group. Between six and a dozen people were turning up to every meeting. When I moved to Leeds, I naturally joined the group there. I discovered that the group had evolved an over-adequate bureaucracy for what it was - a group of three or four activists. The advantage of that was that the secretary and treasurer jobs (for those doing the jobs) were a good substitute for any meaningful political activity. The group was in decline and that was felt in the depressed atmosphere at every meeting, and the gradually decreasing circle of political work that was being done.

The group's activity was fairly limited anyway. One of our main activities, until we were put off by the lack of interest and enthusiasm and the difficulties of street-selling anything political, was to sell the national paper, *Class War*. In Leeds, we also took on quite a lot of the production tasks of the paper over time. I introduced a regular column that would review TV programmes alongside the book and film reviews. My first review was of Brookside. I wrote about the way that middle-class TV writers represent working-class people (i.e. badly, because they hate and despise us), using the example of Jimmy Corkhill. The next one I did was of *The Bill*, it was about how it was being used as a propaganda tool where the police had a 100% clear up rate, where all guilty people eventually see reason and confess. I also introduced a *War Diary* column, which was used to illustrate that there was constant ongoing class conflict, with or without our involvement (or any other so called revolutionary organisations). I wanted to write about things that would be familiar to the readership we were supposed to be trying to attract.

We were occasionally contacted by people who were interested in finding out more about us and maybe in getting involved. We generally wrote back offering to meet the person and discuss our politics. We tried to find out if they were really interested, and to see if we thought they were right for *Class War*. These people had to be put off. On one of these occasions, I volunteered to go to Huddersfield with Dave, another member of Leeds *Class War*.

The bloke we met looked like a right crusty. Anyway, we went to a pub with him and he was a decent bloke. He didn't seem to have any mad ideas about us, and he seemed keen to do some stuff in Huddersfield. Huddersfield is one of the nearest towns to us, but at the time, there were no *Class War* activists there. Unfortunately, Dave had a few too many and got carried away. A couple of drinks brought his middle-class accent back and he started waving his arms around in sweeping motions while loudly explaining why Marx was so misunderstood. The bloke from Huddersfield never got back in touch. Dave is now on the editorial committee of "*Capital and Class*", a theoretical journal of Marxist economics, which sits on a small number of middle-class coffee tables.

night they won a bottle of wine in a raffle and gave it to us. The faces on the SWP members at the next table were a picture when that happened.

When we finally had to stop doing the picket, my comrade was really let down. I know it took a lot out of her, and I think she was going through the same thought processes as I was by then.

At the time, my response was to try to work out some way of laying some kind of obligation on the group. If people were to enjoy the social benefits of the weekly meetings, they should expect to take part in some activity. Only handful of people were ever serious. I wanted to be able to say to people: "if you're not going to do something, don't come to meetings". At the weekly meetings there would be long agendas, and loads of activity suggested, but the same five people would be the only ones putting their hands up when it came to the question of who would do the business. What was even more depressing was that most of the business we were discussing was as incoherent as the babbling of the cannabis damaged brains of some of the anarchist hangers on.

Positive actions rarely led anywhere because hardly anyone had any idea of a coherent long term strategy. We were very proud of ourselves - we were anarchists, but generally, we didn't even know what anarchism was. Those that were clear-headed were lost in a sea of ignorance.

Popular, but not revolutionary, activities on the other hand had plenty of takers. Take the example of "animal rights". For a tiny clique of self-congratulating people, hunt sabotage is exciting, and somehow glamorous. I know that because I was that pathetic at one stage (there is one thing about it, it certainly makes it easier to cop off). I could argue my case as well as any animal rights activist at the time. I now know just how shallow that is.

Class issues were irrelevant to almost everyone I ever met who was involved in animal rights activity. There are even animal rights organisations, on the periphery of the anarchist movement that are dedicated to attacking the idea of class struggle. I know of anarchists who are quite prepared to go out on hunt sabotages with members of the BNP. I once saw a group of hunt saboteurs spend an afternoon confronting a couple of blokes ferreting, catching rabbits to eat, while the fox-hunting upper-class twits went trotting off into the distance.

Another example: Anarcho-punk bands were numerous. The amount of creative energy and sheer hard work involved in song writing, practicing and organising gigs was massive. It also took up a lot of time (even if the results were usually terrible) but there was never any lack of people doing it.

It certainly wasn't that the anarchists were too busy to turn up on marches or put up posters, or anything else for that matter. Very few had jobs at the time (some did have kids though, which was a source of friction within the groups I was involved in. Some people actually believed that babies and toddlers should be taken to meetings - I have a couple of kids

myself now, but there is no way I would want to subject them to an anarchist meeting). They just chose to carry on in their unconstructive way because it was easy, broke up the boredom, and it was fun for a while. I would have had no quarrel with that, if they just hadn't bothered to turn up at meetings. Most anarchists adopted a certain style, a way of dressing etc. that was at best uninviting. Their anarchist "message", apart from being patronising and bullshit, was buried deep under a pose that was calculated to put people off (either consciously or unconsciously).

The politics of the anarchist movement

The politics, when they could be identified, included a dose of liberalism. They didn't get involved in liberal causes as some kind of entrist tactic like Militant, or as a recruitment exercise like the Socialist Worker Party; they went along because they thought, for example: "racism is terrible - and something should be done about it". I honestly don't think they thought about it politically. They saw something that was obviously wrong and launched into a liberal campaign against it.

The two things all liberal campaigns have in common are:

- their lack of class analysis;
- and their domination by middle-class activists.

To introduce ideas of class would contradict the essential structure of the politics of liberal campaigns, i.e. that the middle class assume their natural position and take the lead. That way they ensure that it never gets out of control. For example, it would have destroyed the Anti-Apartheid Movement if criticism based on the class politics of the ANC had been allowed. The animal rights movement would collapse if working-class activists started arguing for class politics.

I remember the campaign against the Gulf War. I turned up at a demonstration in Sheffield with a banner that read "no war but the class war". I was harangued by middle class people telling me that it was an "anti-war" demonstration (it didn't take me long to convince them that they ought to allow me to express myself in peace!).

I can understand some people wanting to get involved with that kind of politics. In a way it can be very rewarding - in a self-satisfying way. What I don't understand is why those people also considered themselves to be revolutionaries.

I should add that I don't think that everything that opposes racism or sexism is part of a middle-class con-trick. Being against racism and sexism are an indispensable part of working-class politics, simply because racism and sexism adversely affect working class people. You can't have a united working class without opposing middle-class attempts to divide us. However, that's not what middle-class anti-racism and anti-sexism are

turn up at the conference. This happened every day, in spite of constant appeals for people to get to the conference on time. God help us if anarchists are ever really running the trains. Every single session started late and most had to be stopped before reaching any useful conclusion. If the afternoon session dedicated to gender issues had started on time maybe it would have been more satisfying to the sisterhood (I doubt it).

I came home a day early from the conference. I missed the big social event of the conference because the Steel City Anarchist Group (as it was then) had agreed to go on a mass trespass in the Peak District, organised by the Ramblers Association. This was to mark the anniversary of the mass trespass of Kinder Scout. Guess what - Nobody else from the Sheffield group turned up! It was raining. You couldn't argue that they didn't have suitable footwear, everyone wore combat boots at the time.

I was back down to earth with a bump. There were two forces working on me at the time. One was a feeling of admiration for some of the people who were at the conference, the other was a complete lack of faith in the people in the Sheffield group.

The few people who had recently got involved in the group for the first time jacked it in quite soon. One reason for this was the attitude of the members of the Direct Action Movement (DAM) who came to about one in three meetings. It became routine for them to turn up odd weeks, rubbish everything we had been working on, manipulate the group into inactivity by arguing against doing anything that didn't fit in with their political position, and then not turn up again for weeks. It is true that what we were doing was pretty poor, but at the time, we were a fairly new group. We had new members who were just finding their feet and were enthusiastic. If the DAM members had turned up regularly and put positive activity on the agenda, it might have been different.

The DAM themselves had serious problems. One example of the apathetic attitude that permeated even that most serious of anarchist organisations occurred when the DAM decided that they would picket the nationwide tour of some Russian orchestra or other. The idea was to publicise the continuation of state violence in post-Soviet glasnost Russia. They roped us in to support them in Sheffield. We agreed to help them give out leaflets and hold their banner. On the day of the concert the bloke who was supposed to be bringing the leaflets turned up with them after everyone in the middle-class audience had already gone into the theatre. We'd been left standing like idiots with an unfashionable banner and no supporting information.

This was not an isolated event. They were generally not reliable. And this was one of the organisations that considered itself the only standard bearer of the proud tradition of true revolutionary anarchism. They now call themselves the Solidarity Federation.

Some time later than this, I went to the Class War International Conference. In spite of logistical difficulties, and time related problems, this was quite a success. I saw working-class men and women discussing politics and addressing large meetings. I was impressed. In particular, I was impressed by some of the older members of Class War, those who were working class and seemed determined to put some effort into changing things. There was a spirit of comradeship and everyone had a good time (especially the Norwegians, who were obsessed with telling everyone that they hated whales and Greenpeace. At the Karaoke night they led us in a Norwegian version of the Internationale). I started to think about joining Class War.

There were some seriously bad points about the conference. The main one was that the last day was sabotaged by a group of middle-class feminists. According to the agenda, on the last day we were set to discuss taking forward the ideas developed all week, about class; community; culture; gender; different forms of struggle etc. We were going to start to build an international movement. We actually spent the day arguing about why the conference had only set aside half a day (out of five days) to specifically discuss gender issues. This debate lasted all day, mainly because the group of women who demanded it heckled anyone who said anything they disagreed with. This was practically the only time this happened during the whole week. By some curious logic, the women who were concerned that women needed support when they take the first steps to address public meetings, were dismissive of any men who were also nervous about stepping up to speak.

The difficulties of organising an international conference, with people coming from as far away as Japan and Australia, drawing up an agenda, organising translations, copying papers, arranging accommodation and entertainment were forgotten. These women insisted on spending the whole of the last day of the conference discussing the one issue that they considered important. Not even actually discussing gender issues, but arguing about why the conference hadn't allocated more time to discussion of gender issues. Fuck what anyone else wanted. A conference that they hadn't been involved in organising, titled "Class War International Conference", hadn't spent enough time discussing gender issues. On the other hand, gender issues had been raised in every workshop, in every other debate all week. And so the International Conference ended in chaos with no discussion of future international links at all.

Another problem was the failure of anything to start on time. This is symptomatic of the anarchist movement in general, as I hope I've already shown. Anyway, each day's sessions were due to start at 11:00 am. By noon, every day, those of us who had bothered to arrive on time had been sitting waiting an hour for lazy bastards to get themselves off their backsides and

about. Middle-class anti-sexism is about trying to convince ("respectable") working class women that their interests lie with middle-class women rather than their own class. Just as an aside, I know anti-sexist men's groups who get together to "discuss their feelings", challenge their own masculinity, and get into massaging each other – without first discussing class politics. Go figure that out! Seriously though, I don't understand how discussing anything on a personal level, without first tackling class can help anybody.

Working class political activity is different to middle-class political activity

For example, I remember a time in Sheffield when the city council was about to allow open cast mining on the edge of the city. When the mine was exhausted, they were going to build a small "business man's airport" on the site. They were going to use a bit of greenery between Sheffield and Rotherham that bordered on a massive working class area. The local people turned out to several massive public meetings to lambast local Labour politicians. It was really heart-rending as working-class people related stories of what life was already like, I never mind what it would be like with millions of tons of dust from the mine, and the arrival of aeroplanes flying over the local school. To our credit, a few members of the anarchist group did our best to show solidarity and support to those who were trying to stop the work happening. As usual, however, we were outsiders and they were suspicious of us.

There is a world of difference between this and, for example, what was going on at ports a couple of years ago, where veal calves were being exported, and the demonstrations that went on around that. It is worth noting that a handful of middle-class dickheads had more success stopping veal calves being exported than thousands of working-class people had in stopping the disruption of their lives caused by British Coal and Sheffield Council.

The middle class "activists" tend to get involved with activity that doesn't directly affect them. Veal calves are not exactly going to let them down by bringing them into contact with harsh reality. Middle class lives are so boring that they desperately search for something to give them a kick. Some go to Monte Carlo, some go to live in Hackney, some get jobs where they can be do-gooders, some get involved in political activity. The difference between that and working-class political activity is that the working class has no choice. Working-class politics is a direct response to attacks on our living and working conditions. Working-class people can't go home and forget about it over a glass of wine. Working-class people, for example, don't make a big deal about squatting, they just do it when necessary. Middle-class squatters do it when it is not necessary and then they stand up and shout about it because they think it is a cool thing to do. They can always go back to their parents when they get evicted.

In the anarchist group, for those who were interested, we held a few discussion meetings. Unfortunately, we never got as far as discussing what anarchism was, or what a revolution would be. We had heated arguments about animal liberation or male oppression of women that showed that many of the people in the movement, although able to rant and rave about their own interests, had no particular reason to be at an anarchist meeting at all. The discussions revolved around vague ideas and equally vague people willing to argue about them.

The result of a movement made up of these people is a movement whose activity is narrow and aimless, relying on stunts and "attitude" to stop itself from completely grinding to a halt. There is no political direction at all, partly because the leadership has no comprehension of working class life, and no way of coming into real contact with working class people. In fact working class culture and language is often denigrated in the smoky pub backrooms where anarchist meetings are usually held. The only relevance the anarchist movement has to class struggle is the occasional mention of the working class in its own articles and slogans. That contradiction, where the movement uses the traditional language of the political left, and yet has no contact with the working class causes confusion. For example, I was talking to a bloke in a pub a couple of years ago. He found it funny that I was "an anarchist who had to go home to put the kids to bed". It was as if I should have been too busy digging tunnels under Manchester Airport, or chucking buckets of water over politicians, to have domestic responsibilities. He couldn't get to grips with the fact that I was an ordinary working bloke with a family.

There was a minority of people in the movement who were serious. Too serious sometimes. They considered their own actions and publications to be more important than they really were. These good comrades passed their time drifting between bursts of activity and periods of debate.

A common feature was the setting up of a caucus of those with a 'class analysis' of society. This caucus would have separate, sometimes secret, invite only meetings. Over time, more of the other anarchists would start coming to the meetings without necessarily changing their views. Instead they learnt the new language. Because the circle of anarchists was so small, with no possible hope of ever increasing, at the end of the day, we all needed each other. Most of us couldn't communicate with anyone outside the movement in any real and meaningful way.

I counted myself as being among the serious, class struggle, anarchists. So what did we do that was so different? In one particular case, the Sheffield Anarchist Communist Group, we held meetings where we would discuss the name of the group (what would the historical significance be if we were anarchist-communists, or communist-anarchists?), membership restrictions, and the aims and objectives of the group for six months. These meetings were for a select few only. In our meetings, we discussed how we could spread class conscious anarchist propaganda. We discussed how we

that it would be practical to build links through an umbrella organisation, instead of the national organisations continuing their own separate trajectories. It was a dismal failure. With one or two exceptions, the 'class conscious' anarchists just didn't want to know. If they were in an organisation already, they considered all other organisations inferior. Not just inferior but not even worth talking to, to find out what they were doing on a national level. Why should they when they can read each other's papers and dismiss them because they don't agree with their political line on, say revolutionary trade unions. There were also various hidden agendas. For example, the ACF are straightforward party-builders, while Subversion wanted to be involved because they are desperate to talk to just about anybody. During the CSAN's anti-election campaign, I once saw a member of Subversion try to seriously discuss economic policy with the Monster Raving Loony candidate in Huddersfield ("so what is your economic policy then, and what does it mean for the working class" Mike "Lenin" - Subversion member). Unfortunately for them, they are also obsessed with abusing and insulting anyone who doesn't share their perfect political line. A habit they share with the 'official' communist movement and one reason why they have just six members.

On the other hand, when the CSAN was up and running, what do you know? the same old faces got involved. Even those people who argued against setting it up on the grounds that it was too narrow a definition of anarchism, and that it would cause the NAIN to collapse. If the coolest thing was to be into 'class struggle', well, lets all be into 'class struggle'. Don't get me wrong, I was delighted that class struggle ideas were in the ascendancy. What concerned me was the ability of some of those involved to switch ideological positions without:

1. realising that they had done; and
2. giving it a second thought.

I learnt an important lesson from this experience. I realised that many anarchists are desperate to belong, to be part of a group, and to hang a label on that group. For some, that is their only reason for going along in the first place. After all, what is the point in labeling yourself with a word that means nothing, except that it makes you part of a private little club. They are also quick to denounce anybody who doesn't belong to the same group. When I later jacked it in, this lesson was reinforced by those people who suddenly started slagging me off behind my back because I was no longer a true believer.

doing anything at all were organising a pathetic Squatters Support Group, for their own little clique (who were all quickly evicted without a struggle). I was left to argue virtually single handedly at Poll Tax meetings. I didn't stand a chance. In spite of my resolve to take lefties on physically when necessary (as it was occasionally). We were then dead on the water in Sheffield too. That just about wiped me out as far as anarchism in Sheffield was concerned.

Class Struggle

For a long time I had argued against anarchists joining any of the national anarchist organisations (Class War, Direct Action Movement, Anarchist Communist Federation). This wasn't from any "anti-organisation" standpoint (one particular infantile disorder that I didn't ever suffer from). My argument, at that time, was that while each of the organisations had strengths (and they all had a lot of weaknesses), it was politically bad to join an organisation just because it was the best thing around. Other people argued that the national organisations were better than nothing. Some people argued that if we joined we could argue our politics from the inside. Mostly I think people joined because of the social set up.

The NAN and the CSAN

As an alternative, I was heavily involved in the revival of the Northern Anarchist Network (NAN) in the mid-1980s, and took a leading role in the formation of the Class Struggle Anarchist Network (CSAN).

The NAN was an open forum for anarchists of any persuasion. It was formed because there were one or two activists in some of the bigger Northern towns and cities who were interested in getting together regularly. We kept minutes of the meetings and produced a regular bulletin, etc.

We spent a lot of time discussing anything from hunt sabotage to prisoner support.

People often came along without a clear idea of why they were there. People could come along, having had no involvement in any political activity at all, and drag out a discussion all day about, for example, whether blokes should wear skirts (true!).

Some of the more serious of us tried to set up a new organisation of anarchists who considered that class was the most important factor in society. The Class Struggle Anarchist Network (CSAN) was born. We were trying to create a loose federation that would act as a forum, welcoming input from any serious anarchist. It would be a means of various organisations and individuals coming together to organise support for local activity, without the obligation to agree on the finer points of politics. At the time I thought

could attract anarchists of the right calibre to our group (we already had a list of the usual suspects) instead of the wasters and the liberals. It took us six months to sort out the bureaucracy (who would be the group secretary?) and a set of agreed aims. Once we had settled on the wording, there didn't seem much else we could do really so we dissolved the group, having managed only to recruit a few wasters and liberals.

I later realised that in this particular case, we had been part of the Anarchist Communist Federation's (ACF) master plan. The ACF had a dream of building up cells of anarchists in every city, who would eventually swing into line behind the banner of the ACF. In each city where they had activists, they tried to organise a suitably titled group and tried to recruit those anarchists that they thought would be the most useful.

The Poll Tax - The anarchist's Dunkirk

Towards the end of the 1980s, the Thatcher Government made its biggest mistake - the Poll Tax. For political organisations across the so-called left (excluding the Communist Party of Great Britain who missed the boat when they neutralised themselves at around this time), this was what they had been waiting for all their lives.

In Sheffield, as in most places, the anti-Poll Tax campaign became a battleground between the Trotskyist organisations. Each one of them shot themselves in the foot before it was all over. We didn't have to, we were too lazy to load the gun.

The Poll Tax, and what it would mean for millions of people was brought to our attention in the pages of Black Flag. At that time Black Flag was a respected anarchist paper, with a record of investigative journalism that was taken seriously beyond the anarchist movement. Black Flag was behind the movement that eventually made the Economic League disappear. The anarchist group in Sheffield subscribed to Black Flag, and we had a weekly reading from it. A couple of years before the Poll Tax was introduced Black Flag had informed its readers of what was coming. We were therefore able to start laying foundations for an anti-Poll Tax organisation well in advance of anyone else, anyone else that is except a small radical Christian group that we came into contact with, led by a crazy but likeable octogenarian American vicar.

By the time the left decided it was time to get involved, Sheffield already had an active anti-Poll Tax group. As soon as they got involved, Militant and the SWP immediately started using bureaucratic methods to gain control of the organisation. We ourselves had not made any attempt to gain control. For one thing, it would have been the end of the group if the local press was able to link the anti-Poll Tax group to "anarchists". We were quite notorious in Sheffield at the time and we didn't have a good relation-

ship with the local paper, the Sheffield Star - a real right wing rag.

We also believed, according to our rhetoric, that people are capable of acting without the leadership of hierarchical political organisations. This, while true, was a cop out. It made life easier, but without a better understanding of the need to defend that position, and the class politics that underlie it, we couldn't stop the left wing Parties walking over us.

Thirdly we were content, naively, to work within a fairly broad popular front.

For a long time some of us had a lot of respect within the anti-Poll Tax movement. This was down to using sensible arguments and putting in a lot of the donkey work, like printing and distributing leaflets. As a result, none of the Trotskyist factions in Sheffield had much early success in seizing the leadership - at least not in the city wide group. In some local groups they had more success. In particular, Militant had some success on some of the big working-class estates. The SWP took control of a couple of groups in student and more affluent areas. In other local groups some of the anarchists were doing a good job (others were equally becoming very embarrassing). In my local group we had a constant battle with SWP members. I occasionally used non-democratic methods to win arguments.

In a few areas anarchists were elected as delegates to the Sheffield wide group. Unlike the Trotskyists we always acted as delegates. I remember long meetings where we forced our group to agree a mandate. The SWP were confused. If they had been in control, no mandate would have existed other than their party line, but as I was going to be the delegate, they were in favour of one in our group. Weird electoral pacts evolved which meant that I was a delegate to most national conferences along with either a member of Militant, or the SWP. I was the Sheffield delegate to both the Militant and the non-Militant early attempts to create a national organisation. I saw the way Tommy Sheridan was eased into the leading role within the national anti-Poll Tax organisation like a hermit crab into a new shell.

While we were turning up at meetings, having our say defending the line, and talking sense, as well as putting in the hours doing the work, just about all the non-Trotskyists would vote with us on any decision. It reached the stage where the left groups would rather not put any suggestion forward than have us swing the group's opinion away from them. They were running scared.

Meanwhile, on the national scene, Militant were taking no chances. They stitched things up quickly and efficiently. The anarchist movement was incapable of taking them on. This wasn't just because of numbers, we were naive to start with. We allowed Militant to take absolute control of the national federation of anti-Poll Tax organisations. They were a well-oiled machine. They controlled the membership, the terminology, the tactics and the purse strings. They decided who would be allowed to speak at meetings and they ruled all criticism of their Stalinist tactics out of order. They siphoned funds away from the anti-Poll Tax movement into their organisation.

The token anarchist who made it on to the Executive Committee of the national Federation was completely ineffectual (I still have a lot of respect for him, he worked very hard for little reward). Finally they resorted to threats and the long arm of the law to cleanse the federation of non-Militant thought. We couldn't stop them, in spite of once coming very close to giving Steve Nally, Militant's second in command in the Poll Tax campaign, a kicking following his "if you know 'em, shop 'em" public statement.

While the situation on the ground was very different, Militant made sure that they were the public face of the movement. They could get away with practically anything, from stealing funds to public denunciations of activists. The only reason I survived within the movement as long as I did was because I was able to command respect through my reputation of being prepared to use whatever means necessary, and having the respect of the activists who weren't in left-wing Parties. From this distance in time I am relieved that the anti-Poll Tax movement never really looked like going further. We would have had no chance.

When it first became obvious that Militant were stitching everything up, I organised a weekend conference for anarchists involved in the anti-Poll Tax campaign. I thought that we would at least be able to make sure that we all knew what was going on. We could then form some kind of damage limitation strategy. We might even have been able to pool resources and build up resistance.

Nine people turned up! Of those, four were from Sheffield, two were from Subversion (Manchester) and two were from the Anarchist Workers Group (Huddersfield). One of those who turned up, a bloke from Manchester Direct Action Movement, was only capable of incoherent melodramatic rambling like some kind of bad caricature of a Trotskyist. We decided to write a joint open letter from the meeting to the anarchist movement, calling for unity and resolve. We told this bloke to write down something along the following lines: that we believed that the campaign against the Poll Tax was in danger of being stifled by Militant, but if we stayed with it, and held our ground we would be able to build on the respect we had gained through our involvement, etc. He read his words back to us:

"Comrades, the tide of red fascism is stamping its jackboot on the revolutionary proletariat... To this day I don't know where he got that from. I knew we were sunk.

As a national movement we were dead in the water. In Sheffield, we surrendered. At the time we were able to outmanoeuvre and out argue the Trotskyists nearly all the time. Usually by just asking the right question at the right time. The situation in Sheffield was becoming an embarrassment to Militant, and it should be remembered that Sheffield was something of a flagship to the left - Socialist Republic and all that. Then, at the crucial moment, just about all the anarchists got bored and stopped going to the meetings. The most important political event in most people's living memory, after the Miner's Strike, and where were the anarchists? Those that were